Egypt

EL AZHAR TODAY AND TOMORROW

BY

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Signs had not been wanting that significant changes were afoot at El Azhar. A chance visit paid to the great University on November 13th, 1925, revealed the noteworthy fact that that was the very last day upon which young girls and boys were to be allowed to sit within its precincts and learn to read and write. To those who were aware of the conditions under which these little ones had studied, this news brought no small measure of relief. It was a sorely needed reform. Another source of interest, and it must be said, of surprise too, was to observe the preparations that were being made for the introduction of a system of electric lighting within that ancient mosque. There was something symbolic about this effort to modernize the material conditions of the University; it hinted at the presence of a new spirit, of a new outlook, of a new movement in its residents, prompting and shaping these external changes.

At the time we did not realize the full measure of what this movement was. It was a second

visit paid early in December in the company of Mohammed Khalid Hassanein Bey, of the Religious Institutions Department, that put into our hands the key which unlocked for us the answer to our surmises. He most graciously escorted us once more around the University, and laid before us in detail the plans which he is projecting to make the Azhari system of education conform more closely to modern requirements.

It was strange enough to see a western-dressed effendi, educated in London, responsible for devising a policy for the modernisation of learning in this home of conservatism and orthodoxy. It was stranger still to learn that the request for these reforms had originated, not with the Egyptian Government, nor yet with an enlightened public opinion, but with the students of El Azhar themselves. What a contrast, we thought, with the bitter controversy which raged round the first proposals to introduce modern subjects into the curriculum little more than thirty years ago! Here was further evidence of the presence of a new spirit, of a new determination to pluck from the west the choicest of its intellectual fruits, of a new intellectual and spiritual movement, pulsating through the whole body of Islam.

Yet the explanation of this change of outlook is simple enough. Former students of El-Azhar, who had secured the Primary Certificates after four years of Islamic study, or who had taken the Secondary Certificate after eight years and, still more, those who had pursued the full course for the final examination to the end of the twelfth year, found themselves, very frequently, unable to obtain posts either in a government office or in a business or profession outside the government, for the very obvious reason that the type of education they had received, far from equipping them, rather unequipped them for any such work. To persist in this type of education, merely because it was traditional, might satisfy the scruples of conservative orthodoxy, but it was thoroughly uneconomic and, from the point of view of a commercial career, manifestly unsound. Something, clearly, had to be done to enable the ex-Azhari student to compete with the effendi who had received his education in a government or a missionary school.[1]

[1] A very interesting historical and analytical sketch of education at El Azhar may be found in the October, 1925, issue of *The Nineteenth Century*, entitled "Al Azhar University" by Pierre Arminjon and Pierre Orabites. The article was apparently written to show that the intellectual "awakening has overlooked Al Azhar," and demonstrates forcibly the crying need for exactly such reforms as are now being effected.

Hitherto the subjects taught at El Azhar have been graded in three grades of unequal value. The first, to which is given chief place, comprises the transmitted branches of knowledge: theology, jurisprudence, explanation of the Koran, the art of recitation of the Koran, the traditions, and dogmatics proper. In the second rank comes the Arabic language which includes literature, grammar, rhetoric, lexicography, etymology, prosody, composition and reading. In the third, and lowest class, are placed history, geography, natural science, mathematics and astronomy. That the last group, which we should consider as by far the most important and useful, has hitherto been regarded as purely secondary and subsidiary may be inferred from the fact that the classes for them are arranged for the afternoon, and not for the morning, when the mind is freshest, and that the periods devoted to them are patently few and inadequate.

Something, clearly, had to be done. The Azhari students sent successive delegations to the Government, demanding reform. The sheikhs at the head of the institution were sympathetic to these demands. The Government itself was naturally, not opposed to anything progressive. So on October 1st, 1925, Mohammed Khalid Hassanein

Bey was appointed to scrutinize the present system and conditions at El Azhar and to make proposals for their improvement.

Although, as will be seen, little more than two months have passed since Hassanein Bey received his appointment, he has already laid the foundations for what appears to us a very sound progressive system of educational reconstruction. Clearly it was unwise, if not futile, to attempt to do everything at once. The only result would have been to stir up old prejudices and rouse fierce opposition. He set himself, it seems, three definite tasks: to effect certain very necessary improvements in the conditions of life at the University, to strengthen the scientific side of the curriculum, and to bring the courses of study at El Azhar into line with those which are followed at the Government schools. He very wisely decided to leave the religious studies entirely alone.

Almost his first action was to have the children transferred from El Azhar to some neighbouring mosques. A difficulty, however, presented itself here. Certain sums of money had been left as endowments for the education of children within El-Azhar. To remove them from the precincts of the mosque would be to deprive

them of the benefit of these legacies. To leave them there was contrary to what was felt to be right and proper. In order, then, to solve the difficulty, resort was had to the simple expedient of interpreting El Azhar as signifying not the great mosque alone, but the whole district in which it stands, and thus comprehending the mosques to which the little ones have been sent!

Attention was then turned to the educational system proper. As has been observed, it was necessary to go only one step at a time. The present conditions of admission to the Azhar course will continue to remain for some years to come. They are, that candidates should be between ten and sixteen years of age, should be able to read and write well, should know by heart the whole of the Koran, should be in sound health, and should have a good character.

No change in this direction is contemplated at the moment. It is with the first of the four years of the primary course and the first of the four years of the secondary course that Hassanein Bey is beginning his reforms. How this process of refashioning the objects and methods of El Azhar education will shape may best be estimated by a review of what Hassanein Bey has already achieved with the first year of the secondary

course. The alterations effected in the primary syllabus correspond with those made in the secondary, though they are naturally more elementary in character.

It is to be remembered that only the last four years of the twelve years of study are actually spent in the mosque of El Azhar itself. The students for the primary and secondary certificates have hitherto been distributed for instruction, and occasionally also for residence, over various mosques, not in Cairo alone, but also in several of the largest towns in Egypt. It is now proposed that the students for the secondary certificates should attend their lectures not in mosques only but in properly equipped schools. Already Hassanein Bey has secured, or transformed, five schools for this purpose. One is in Cairo itself, a second in Zagazig, a third in Alexandria, a fourth in Tanta, and the fifth in Assiut. For the time being, the primary education will continue to be given in mosques.

We were kindly allowed to visit and inspect the new secondary school in the Helmiya district of Cairo. Structural alterations have not yet been completed, but we saw there a fine, airy, well-lighted building, furnished and equipped with the educational requirements of a modern school,

and staffed, not with sheikhs only, but with effendis borrowed in their spare time from the Government schools. The appointment of Hassanein Bey was made too late to allow him to secure his own staff and equipment for the present year. Temporarily he is making use of the desks which are generally reserved for Government examinations, and he has arranged for teachers from the Government schools to lecture in their free periods. His ultimate purpose is to furnish the school with the most modern outfit, and to train his own staff of teachers.

At present there are ten classes at the Helmiya School. Five of these are special classes for men who, having secured their Azhar primary certificate, now wish to take up posts as teachers in Government schools. These men will receive special training for one year in the elements of arithmetic, algebra, geometry, drawing, physical drill, &c., and if successful in their examination at the end of the year, will be qualified as Government teachers. The other five classes are designed for those who propose to complete the full Azhari course. They will continue, as hitherto, to receive lectures on religious subjects from the Sheikhs appointed by El Azhar but, in addition, they will now

pass through a carefully prepared course of study on all those literary and scientific subjects which we consider to be an indispensable part of a good education. The examination in these subjects will be an obligatory and integral part of the syllabus for the secondary certificate.

What is being arranged this year for the first year of the primary and of the secondary courses will be applied next year to both the first and the second years. Thus, after the passing of four years the whole primary and secondary syllabus will have been remodelled with a scientific side ranking as of equal value with the religious side. Then the magic hand of reconstruction will touch the Azhar itself.

The curriculum for the final certificate is to be submitted to the same process of transformation as is now being carried out with the two preceding courses Laboratories and demonstration departments are projected; modern equipment is to be installed: the library to be enlarged and made more available to students. The details of this scheme have not, as is natural, taken final shape as yet, but no pains are to be spared to make the syllabus thorough, scientific and useful.

All reforms, however, are not postponed till four years have slipped by. Some are already in process of execution. It is intended that, in the future, no students should reside in the mosque

of El Azhar. Instead, they are to be housed in hostels under proper supervision and already one hostel has been obtained accommodating three hundred and fifty students. The present dormitories within El Azhar will thus be vacated, and the proposal is to convert them into classrooms. Whatever may be the loss to tradition or to æsthetics, in that the students will no longer squat in picturesque semi-circles around the chair where the professor sits, the gain in efficiency and in educational advancement will be enormous.

No change is intended for the time being in the status of foreign students who come to El Azhar for special periods of religious study. It is interesting, in passing, to note that according to the last census the number of such students in Cairo did not exceed one-fifteenth of the whole. Whereas there were then 9,758 Egyptians taking the University course in Cairo, there were only 629 from other countries, namely 264 Syrians, 120 Moorish, 104 Turkish, 57 Sudanese, 45 Berberene, 9 Kurds, 7 from the Hijaz, 7 Javanese, 6 Abyssinians, 5 Afghans, 3 Indians, and 2 from Bagdad.[2] These figures controvert the impression sometimes given that El Azhar is filled with

[2] See "The University of El Azhar," by Mohammed Abu Bakr Ibraheem, teacher of Arabic at Towfiqieh Secondary School — a lecture delivered in August, 1924, for the Summer Vacation Course of Cambridge. (Cairo — one shilling)

students from all sections of the Moslem world. If we take into account the number of Egyptian students studying in mosques affiliated to El Azhar in different parts of Egypt, then the proportion of foreign students will be considerably smaller. It is estimated that there are altogether 18,000 students attached directly or indirectly to the Azhar system of education.

So much for El Azhar today and tomorrow. But who would dare prophesy what will happen the day after? What, for example, will be the effect both on the Azhari curriculum and on the mind of the average student of the inevitable clash of modern scientific ideas and traditional methods of study and interpretation? Will there not ensue some modification in the religious outlook of the Moslem student? There opens before us the vision of untold possibilities, whose ultimate forces time alone will reveal. One thing, however, is certain, and that is that the day of opportunity is dawning, so let us then be, as our Lord bade us, with "our loins girded about and our lights burning, and ourselves like unto them that wait for their Lord" . . . for "the Son of man cometh at an hour that ye think not."

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Cairo.

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